Form Is Information

A Conversation with Uli Aigner

Pauline Doutreluingne

 ‘With the project *One Million*, I take globalisation personally. The plan of using my own hands and wheel to throw a million pieces of porcelain crockery by the end of my life began in 2014. I engrave a number on each object in the exact order of their production and thus also identify the vessels as signed and unique works. There is an image of every single piece on the website www.eine-million.com, and the location of each number can be found on a map of the world.’

This is Uli Aigner’s description of her lifelong project, in which she is embodying, so to speak, Richard Sennett’s theories about the philosophical bond between hand and mind. Her *One Million* project deals with work, milieu and social utopias which probe the relationship between production, object and world. This conversation with the artist took place in December of 2018.

Pauline Doutreluingne: Form plays a very large role in your work. Can you describe how these very different pieces come about?

Uli Aigner: The pieces of *One Million* porcelain come from commissions. I’m interested in personally dealing with my patrons and their individual contexts. The people or institutions who come to me want porcelain of very different kinds. I try to grasp what sort of visions or story they have in mind within this context. With my work I provide an answer to what I’ve understood of their ideas and wishes. It’s like language. I answer by acting in the analogue realm: in space and time. Every form is, so to speak, the evidence of an act.

P.D.: Is it always a dialogue?

U.A.: Yes. Although the channels of communication which we all – consciously or unconsciously – use do become aesthetically superimposed on to the content. That’s why I try to make aesthetics a theme – and to simultaneously undermine this outward layer by making crockery for everyday use. Porcelain is a political material. *One Million* is a very easy-to-use tool, and I work with it to earn this wonderful right to lifelong dialogues. After all, at the Bauhaus they also had the idea that well-made things help, that people communicate better through them than through poorly made things and that the entire reason they are there is to create connections.

P.D.: What significance does the materiality of porcelain have for you?

U.A.: This material is like stone, totally dense, and it will outlive you: my dishes will be there for the next thousand years. Unless someone intentionally smashes it, porcelain lasts forever, it does not deteriorate. Porcelain is not ceramic. It has a different history and a different function. Porcelain has a higher firing temperature, and it has a different chemical composition than clay and stoneware, which is very porous and thus breaks more easily. My preference for porcelain comes from its being so steeped in world history and from its outliving us by so long. After all, I want to break out of the age in which I live!

Porcelain is almost like the world itself for me. It is stone. Nothing older exists. For me, though, porcelain is simultaneously also like every kind of material: it comes from the earth and returns back to it. There’s everything in it: organic, inorganic. I can give it a form that will then also last for a thousand years. By contrast, I don’t know how things will stand with the internet site in a thousand years.

P.D.: Your series *One Million* also includes a monumental dish that burst during firing. What new insights does that bring? And does art have solutions to offer in today’s divided society?

U.A.: I also exhibit the broken dishes, for learning how to look for cracks, for flaws. That is lived analogue life: why shouldn’t I see and show all the suboptimal things that happen? The fact that some dishes break on me, that some also don’t turn out so pretty – of course that actually happens in this project. In the photos on the website, I present a continuous analogue sequence that excludes nothing, not even mistakes and ruptures.

P.D.: Is every set or dish an original piece or do you also reproduce certain forms? Can you remember every single commission?

U.A.: Yes, at least so far. And the *Territorial Claim* series, for example, is about reproducing an idea. The 193 dishes stand for the sovereign states recognised by the United Nations and the thirteen others for the countries whose sovereignty is still being negotiated. In the context of the *One Million* world performance and an installation that includes a video installation, these 206 pieces of crockery will actually be put to use at the *bauhaus100* opening festival at the Akademie der Künste in January of 2019.

P.D.: What do these dishes look like?

U.A.: First of all they’re crockery, like always. I derived the forms of the 206 dishes from Oskar Schlemmer’s costume designs for the *Triadic Ballet*. For the most part these costumes consist of concentric concave forms. Their theme is space, body and movement. These are also the central themes of the *One Million* project. It is about proportions, hollow spaces, surfaces and edges, and it is about weight.

P.D.: How do you see your work in relation to the Bauhaus?

U.A.: In my *One Million* installation *Timeline* in the context of *original bauhaus*, I make reference to six dishes produced in the Bauhaus’s ceramics workshop after designs by Otto Lindig and Theodor Bogler (fig. 1–4). I’m going to create portraits of these dishes. I’m examining their bodies and their forms. These *original bauhaus* dishes all belong to the same typology: spherical belly and broad lip.[[1]](#footnote-1) They are stoneware, either thrown on the wheel or also cast in moulds. At first glance they seem the same or at least to look similar. However, their corporeal quality differs on account of the varying thickness of the clay, the character of their rims, their weight and their surface decoration. When I trace this form back to its origins, I find it in the ceramic dishes of China’s Neolithic cultures (fig. 6). I then bring this form into the period of the Bauhaus and, from there, to the present and give it a new future in the installation (fig. 8-13). In my portraits of dishes I also work with variations in scale, that is, with sizes and proportions. How small can a form be, and how large can I manage to throw that same form? I play with something we actually know from films: zooming in and out. In addition to my hands and my sense of touch, my filmic eye also serves me in my attempt to grasp the dish and recognise its form – to refer to these two shared parameters in different ways. Over thousands of years the function of these forms has never changed.

Georg Kubler’s book *The Shape of Time* is important to me.[[2]](#footnote-2) Kubler bases his work on a history of things, that is, all human productions in the sense of artefacts. In doing so, he avoids a discussion of originality in relation to the artwork, which is particularly problematic for prehistoric and non-European cultures. By eliminating the dichotomy of form and meaning, Kubler invests the object with increased value, because materiality and form are now understood as indispensable preconditions of meaning.

In this sense I make no distinction between artwork and utilitarian object.

For me, form is also how I perceive my material. Form is simultaneously text and information. Form is informed material. Form is always information.

P.D.: It’s impressive that you are creating this mammoth project together with the little nucleus of your family.

U.A.: This work really does provide our four children with special insights into a great variety of societies, they earn pocket money when they help out with logistical tasks or events related to *One Million* and my partner Michal Kosakowski carries out half the project: he produces the media interfaces. I invented this project for our family, developed it out of the necessities of our family. I insist that existence is simple. That we should not drive ourselves crazy. That there is a logic. That we can choose something for ourselves. You can decide what you do – and you’ll learn how if you do it properly. And with that, we’ve arrived back at a Bauhaus idea: proposing ways to counter the devaluation of one’s own existence and to counter the devaluation of others’ existence through our own actions.

1. The lip is the raised outer part of a dish. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)